IN THE CLAIMS:

Please amend the claims as follows:

1. (Amended) A method for packaging a product in a hermetically sealed container having a cup-shaped rigid or semi-rigid body (106) provided with a rim (107) fitted with a closure (124), the method comprising:

i) introducing the product into said (cup-like) shaped body (106);

ii) forming proximate to the rim (107) a confined space (204), said space having at least one gas inlet (134) and at least one gas outlet (112), said space (204) being defined between said body (106) and a closure-forming, substantially gas-impermeable membrane (200), said confined space being (-)formed adjacent to the rim and at a distance therefrom;

iii) introducing a replacement gas through said inlet (134) into said confined space (204) to replace at least a substantial portion of gas originally contained in the container body (106);

iv) relative displacement of said body (106) and said (closure-forming member) (200) towards each other to bring the closure-forming membrane (200) in contact with said rim (107), and

v) hermetically attaching the membrane(200) to the rim to form a gas-tight seal therebetween.

2. A method according to Claim 1, wherein said product is a pasty material.

3. A method according to Claim 1 or 2, wherein said product is a food product.

4. (Amended) A method according to Claim 1, wherein the closure-forming membrane (200) is a plastic film.

5. (Amended) A method according to Claim 1, wherein said confined space (204) is brought in communication with the external atmosphere via the said gas outlet (112).

6. (Amended) A method according to Claim 1, wherein said confined space (204) is brought in communication with a vacuum forming means (604) via the said gas outlet.

7. (Amended) An apparatus for forming a hermetically sealed product-containing container, the container having an essentially cup-like shaped body (106) with rim (107) fitted with a closure (124); wherein said container is not filled entirely by the product such that a residual space (210) remains between the product and the rim; the apparatus comprising:

- a holder (104) for holding said container body (106);
- a spacer member (130), having a central opening (132),

- a means for (brining) the spacer member into sealing engagement against the holder and against a closure-forming substantially gas-impermeable membrane (200), the arrangement being such that in the sate of sealing engagement the inwardly facing wall of said central opening (132), the container body (106), the holder (104) and the closure-forming membrane (200), define together a confined space (204), said space is adjacent to the rim (107) and at a distance therefrom;

- at least one gas inlet (134) and at least one gas outlet (112) for introducing a replacement gas into said confined space (204), and replacing at least a substantial portion of gas originally contained in the container body (106);

- a sealing mechanism comprising a displacing arrangement for displacing one or both of said container body (106) and said closure-forming membrane (200) towards one another and attaching them to one another in a gas-tight fashion.

8. (Amended) An apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said holder (104) has an opening (108) for receiving the body (106) of the container.

9. (Amended) An apparatus according to Claim 8, wherein the opening (108) of the holder (104) is fitted with an axially

projecting skirt (110) for engagement with the rim (107) of the container (106).

10. (Amended) An apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said gas outlet (112) is formed in the holder (104) and comprises, through going bores.

11. (Amended) An apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said gas inlet (134) is formed in the spacer member (130) and comprises nozzles for introducing a replacement gas into the confined space (204) a sealed space.

12. (Amended) An apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said sealing mechanism is capable to bring said closure-forming membrane (200) into sealing engagement with the rim (107) through the central opening (132) of said spacer member (130).

13. (Amended) An apparatus according to Claim 7, wherein said closure-forming membrane (200) is a continuous (filmmade) of a heat-weldable plastic material.

14. (Amended) An apparatus according to Claim 13, comprising a trimming member (180) for trimming edges of (the NAB film) (200) brought into sealing engagement with the rim (107).

15. (Amended) An apparatus according to Claim 10, wherein said gas inlet comprises nozzles (334) made in the spacer member (130) for introducing a replacement gas into (confined space) (204) a bottom surface of said holder (304) is in sealing

engagement with a vacuum-forming cup (604) and wherein said gas outlet is in communication with the vacuum-forming cup.

16. (Amended) An apparatus according to claim 14, in which said sealing mechanism is provided with a heat sealing plate (160) wherein the trimming member (180) and the heat sealing plate are axially displaceable towards the closure-forming membrane (200) through the central opening (132) in the spacer member (130)